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Comment

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Comment by the Editor

CONTRASTS OF WAR

War is a savage contest. It is a game with no rules of fair play, no object but victory, no means of decision except force. Intolerant, relentless, extravagant, the organized destruction that is politely called belligerency capitalizes the elements of barbarity and disregards the traits in human nature that serve as the bases of civilization. Virtue is distorted into evil and sin is glorified.

Always deplorable and inevitably sanguinary, the conduct of war seems to belie the advance of civilization by its increasing ruthlessness and totality. Soldiering used to be an attractive career for adventurous unemployed men who did not want to be sailors. But mercenary armies went out of fashion, like handicrafts in a machine age.

The armies in the Civil War, composed mainly of volunteers, were too large to be hired and too patriotic to be drafted. The hazards of war were concentrated on the battlefields. Women and children were comparatively safe, and important cities were captured without serious damage. But now the noncombatants at home suffer as much as the soldiers, and places of no strategic value are

devastated. It seems that as the means of comfortable living become greater, the more generally do wars prevent the enjoyment of such progress. For every gain of science or morality, the ravaging forces of war exact a more exorbitant sacrifice.

Without minimizing the hardships of the Civil War, most of the campaigns were mere camping excursions in comparison with the invasions of Poland and Finland, while the siege of Vicksburg and the assault upon Petersburg were only prophetic of trench warfare on the western front in Europe. The Yankees were not very welcome in Memphis when that important city was captured, but only a few were shot at by zealous secessionists. Business continued as usual — or more briskly. Theatres and saloons were unhindered by blackouts or military suppression. The narrow escape of a stage villain from a drunken cavalry captain was the nearest approach to atrocity. Profiteering sutlers were more hated than the enemy. Perhaps it is this contrast of past and present warfare that makes the martial memories of the Civil War seem glamorous.

J. E. B.